

LAST KNOCKINGS

River Wear salmon do not give themselves up easily, as Andrew Flitcroft discovers on a secluded back-end beat

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB DENSON

Targeting the far-bank flow and cover on the River Wear's Bedburn Estate.

TWO SEASONS AGO I CHALLENGED myself to catch a Wear salmon. The County Durham river was once regarded as England's finest sea-trout river, a match for the most famous Welsh rivers in terms of the average size of its fish. I tasted what it had to offer in the Noughties, landing seven sea-trout over three nights averaging 3½lb (the biggest over 7lb). However, in recent years, catches of sea-trout have declined in line with other rivers. Interestingly, though, Wear salmon numbers are rising.

I've had my eye on a private upper-river beat, six miles above Bishop Auckland. Bedburn Estate has more than three miles of the Wear and while it has season rods, the owner, Anthony Iremonger, offers limited day rods through Fishpal. The upper beat has eight named pools over 1½ miles of double and single bank, while the lower has nine pools over 1¾ miles of double bank. There are two day-rods per beat.

When I spoke to Anthony it soon became apparent that Bedburn is a back-end beat heavily reliant on water — the classic drop after a spate is essential for access and reward.

"You must come in October," he said. The catch figures agree. Bedburn's five-year average for salmon (2014-2018) is 46.6 fish, of which 39.6 were caught in October. In October 2017, 75 salmon were recorded. Not bad for a single beat, even on a prime salmon river.

Whereas Bedburn catches used to be roughly 75% sea-trout and 25% salmon, now salmon dominate with up to 80% of the annual catch. The size of the fish has increased, too. Once, a salmon of 12lb-14lb would be talked about, whereas now Anthony expects fish in the high teens and twenties to be caught each season. The biggest salmon in recent years was a 29lb cock fish taken at Fordstead pool on a Flamethrower by Becky Furbank. It was October 30,



LEFT
Andrew changes fly for the streamy water.

RIGHT
Owners Anthony and Emly Iremonger with labradors and a sprocker.



RIGHT
Season rod Geoff Cruickshank talks Andrew through the pools.

"Now salmon dominate with up to 80% of the annual catch"

2013, and Becky's second-ever day's salmon fishing. She was with her husband, Tim, who stumbled and fell in headfirst when he tried to grab the fish's tail. Fortunately, he redeemed himself and on the second attempt the fish was landed.

I arrived at Bedburn not really knowing what to expect but I was joined by a local expert. Geoff Cruickshank lives just 20 minutes away and has fished Bedburn for ten years and the Wear since the mid-1980s. He's Anthony's most persistent and successful rod. The Wear I'd previously fished wasn't big so I'd brought a 12-footer, thinking that much of the river is tree-lined and a spey-cast might be necessary. In hindsight, a switch rod or single-hander would have been ample because the river was low.

I parked at the top of the lower beat, half a mile or so along a track, leaving a short walk down the side of a field followed by a well-trodden wooded path along the river. The first pool you glimpse is Shafto. This and the handful of pools downstream are popular because access is straightforward. We started at Shafto where a fast neck is followed by a run gouged into the high far bank with gravel on the nearside. I had a sharp tug where the turbulence flattened: a salmon or a sea-trout? The flow then spread as the pool widened, but the flow under the far bank was best.

The Wear here is not deep and in low water it soon peters out and the fly needs working. This concentrates your efforts on the upper third of the pools and explained why Geoff was using a single-hander to delicately pitch his fly between and under trees on the far bank. I felt over-gunned.



LEFT
This sea-trout shot out and grabbed Andrew's Stoat in a fast run.

The wooded path branches down to each pool, making it fairly obvious where to start. Only then do you have a clear view of what each pool offers. Some are open with shingle banks and ample casting space, while on others you'll have crack willow breathing down your neck. A spey-cast is necessary on most. The path's elevation gives you a great view of the river's channels and the depth and length of the glides and tails. But beware: sometimes the path is close to the river and you risk alerting the fish, which make bow-waves as they charge across the tails.

In the low, clear water of my visit, the tails were just too thin and the residents too spooky. It was October and the fish could have been sea-trout or salmon ready to spawn. That's what you're likely to get on any upper-river salmon beat at this time of year.

Resident fish make up the bulk of the catches at Bedburn, but it seems there is a purple patch in June — if water is forthcoming — when the odd fresh fish kicks off the season.

The clock ticks quickly when you're on a beat for the first time when around every corner a pool may hold a willing prize — and my host was eager for me to wet my net. We fished a dozen pools, including those just above the A68. In all honesty, it was too much water covered too quickly. One beat is more than enough for a day's fishing. Our efforts went unrewarded and being the end of the season, it would be another year before I could exact my revenge. You know that feeling. One of being beaten by a river or its fish and needing to redress the balance. The Aberdeenshire Dee was a thorn in my side for a while; the Cumbrian Derwent still is; so is the River Ure. I vent my spleen not just on individual rivers, but beats, too. Kincardine on the Spey: full of fish — couldn't catch them! And even if you do succeed, the fish may be either small or tartan — not the gleaming bar of silver of which dreams are made.

Last October, when the weather had broken and the scorching temperatures of summer had fallen to near normal, I made a last-minute call to Anthony. The river had been up and was dropping. "Fish have been caught," he said.

This time I needed no assistance. I jumped in the car and three hours later I was setting up a 9½ft seven-weight. I felt much more relaxed. There was no photographer waiting for that special moment, no host to impress — just me and the river. I knew what to expect, I knew which pools I fancied most, and why.

The river was a little higher than my previous visit, but dropping and clear. There was more pull, more swing, more pool in which to fish a fly enticingly.

On Shafto, as my fly swung across the spot where last year I'd had an offer, I felt I was in with a much better chance. I fished it quickly. There's no point in sitting on one pool here.



ABOVE
Walking from pool to pool along the wooded track.

RIGHT
Ringing the changes. A rubber-legged thingy from Russia.



Fish it through, then move on, but return later in the day.

Two pools below Shafto is White's. It looks the most likely of them all with overhead cover at the fast neck and the flow running over high bedrock into a visible gutter where it deepens. You can imagine fish nosing up from the slower body of the pool to sniff whether it's time to move on. My little Stoat's Tail was grabbed savagely in the neck, just as I thought it was coming around too fast. The angry sea-trout threw every bit of its 2½lb at me before I had him. He was what you'd expect of a sea-trout in October, but he was a confidence-booster.

The gutter under the far bank's bedrock shelf didn't deliver, but a salmon showed where the pool broadened. There were definitely fish here, but I moved on along the wooded path to High Garth. As I prepared to make a cast, a figure with a double-hander appeared behind me. I said hello and looked at him inquisitively. I'll be damned if it wasn't Geoff.

One of us fished the pool while the other sat on a bench and watched as fish showed across and downstream. "How many fish did you finish off with last year, Geoff?" I asked.

"14," he said. He had three in June and the rest in October.

"What's the biggest you've ever had?"

"Around 20lb in 2011."

"What about sea-trout?"

"A 13-pounder ... same season, but the average size of sea-trout has reduced over the past four or five years. Catches, too. There used to be twice as many syndicate rods, so that could explain why."

We chatted on a little while, but we were there to fish and soon said our farewells, wishing each other luck.

WEAR SALMON

“I plucked out an odd-looking fly that I’d picked up in Russia”

By this time both pools I’d fished in the morning had been properly rested. I had a quick flick through White’s again, then headed for Shafto. It was 3pm and while I stood on the gravel thinking what I could do differently a fish moved near a tree root under the far bank. It was a classic spot, where the current was slowing and spreading, with overhead cover.

Soon, something took an inquisitive pull at my orange shrimp, a soft draw like someone pulling at your cuff. I wondered if it was or it wasn’t... I needed to try something different and plucked out an odd-looking fly that I’d picked up in Russia. It was a small plastic tube with a silver cone, a black wing infused with brown marabou and four bright orange rubber legs. Heaven forfend! But it didn’t matter — I was alone.

My next cast with the thingamabob and my sleeve was nearly pulled off. I lifted into something dogged, which then woke up. It had been on for two minutes when I heard a voice behind me — Geoff was just in time to net it. A cock fish wearing all its autumn clobber. My first Wear salmon.

BELOW

Geoff with a fish from Shafto pool caught on a small Stoa.



ABOVE
Andrew's cock fish in full autumn colour.

RIGHT
Minutes later, Geoff was in.



With my challenge met, I could sit back and take it all in while Geoff had a go. Before he’d reached the same spot, he was in, too. No sooner had I taken a few snaps than a hen fish lay in the net with a small Stoa’s Tail in its jaw. Two fish in 15 minutes. A switch had been flicked and we’d been in the right place at the right time.

If that doesn’t sum up salmon fishing, it sums up this beat. On both trips, I’d fished Shafto pool extensively, but the timing has to be right. The fish, both residents, were there all along. You just need to keep going back, which is doable, given the low rod pressure this beat receives.

Bedburn is very quiet and you’re unlikely to see another angler. Many of the syndicate members live far away, in Hampshire and Cambridgeshire. The pools are many and varied, requiring a roaming approach. There are no huts, no toilets and no-one telling you what to do — and that’s the attraction. It’s a beat where you can have a flick here and there, and then fall asleep under a tree to the sound of kingfishers. You may see an otter or a deer. You’ll certainly see the seasons at their best. This is archetypal salmon fishing on a small spate river. Pick your moment wisely. **T&S**

What are you waiting for?

Tickets for the Bedburn Estate cost from £25 (April) to £70 (October) with a maximum of two day-rods available on the upper and lower beats per day.

Book through Fishpal at fishpal.com or call 01573 470 612.

